WHEN A PRIMITIVE AND A CIVILIZED MONEY MEET

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IT IS A COMMON story these days to read of a primitive economic system or even large segments of an entire social structure which have become greatly altered by the direct or indirect effects of the society coming into contact and participation with the Western money economy. It is held by many that the universality of our money, a medium by which standardized values can be fixed to almost any good or service, is one of the main factors in this kind of change, for primitive societies are frequently organized around more than one system of valuation. One anthropologist[1] has termed this "multicentric," by which he refers to the fact that one system of valuation is frequently applicable to a limited set of transactions, while a different system is required in another set, and moreover, that these are not in theory convertible.

I shall attempt here to outline the current situation among some islands in the southwest Pacific where this is *not* the case. Here Australian money is competing with an indigenous system of universal currency, which, for all we know, has been in existence for centuries. It is an unusual situation, for owing to their economic behavior which is determined by a strong profit motive, the people want both, yet the native currency is disappearing.

The Santa Cruz Group, lying two hundred miles east of the main British Solomons, are a complex of volcanic islands, true atolls, and raised atolls in which live about six thousand people.[2] They speak eight different languages: one Polynesian, three other Malayo-Polynesian but of a different stock from Polynesian, and four others, related to each other, but as yet unrelated to anything else. The northern part of this group consists of Santa Cruz Island, the largest; the Reef Islands, thirty miles to the north; and the Duff Islands, still fifty miles further out to the northeast. The culture in these is, by Melanesian standards, fairly homogeneous, and from the economic point of view, it is convenient to think of them as participating in a single economic system.

One of the striking things about this island economy is the number of district and island specialties. These embrace a wide range of skills and services, among which are agricultural specialties, animal husbandry, fishing techniques, and many arts and crafts such as canoe making, loom weaving, and clothing and ornament manufacture. Some of these crafts require the bringing of raw materials from one district or island to another before the products are manufactured and the finished goods are redistributed throughout the group. These specialties are largely inherited patrilineally, and many are protected from expropriation by others by magical and supernatural means. Despite this individuality in production, there is a high correlation of certain specialties with the ecological zone within which it is found. For example, specialized fishing techniques are to be found associated with types of reefs, with lagoons, or their absence; pig breeding with abun-

1, 2 [For footnotes, see category 116, page 68.-Analyst]

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438 dant sandy areas where coconuts can be grown to feed them; taro production with a special type of soil; and types of arboriculture with rainfall zones and forestry cover.

[184] As implied by this individual and regional specialization, there is a complex system of trade through which these products are distributed. But this trade is far more than a means of conveying products of one area to another. It is a system in which all those who participate do so with the intention of making a profit. It is real commerce, and the

[556] wealth amassed in this way is expended in bride prices, maturation feasts, rituals, and entertainments through which the initiators and organizers derive prestige. In the familiar Melanesian pattern, prestige, wealth, and authority are but three aspects of the same thing, namely, the political system.

[436] While goods of many kinds flow in several directions, there are some goods which move only in specific directions, and which are basic to the entire system. One of these is feather currency, in terms of which all transactions are made. This is an all-purpose currency, and it is made only on Santa Cruz Island. Its manufacture demands the com-

436 bined skills of three different hereditary specialists. The currency itself is a belt, six
287 fathoms long, about two inches wide, and made of feathers, fiber, and cord. The feathers
[825] are the red down from the breast, head, and back of a small honeysucker *(Myzomela cardinalis)*. Catching these birds in the forest and plucking the down from them is one of the specialties. The second specialty consists of pasting the red down onto platelets or shingles made of ordinary wood pigeon *(Columba* sp.) feathers with the sticky sap taken

[824] from the fruit of the paper mulberry *(Broussonetia papyrifera)*. The third specialist binds these shingles onto a cord foundation to make the finished belt. A piece of finished currency has one surface of red down and an undersurface which shows only the binding. The feathered surface, made up of overlapping shingles, sometimes resembles the flexible scutes of a snake.

435 Feather currency is perishable, for it gets damaged and worn with use and by the
436 ravages of vermin, molds, and mildews. As it gets worn and damaged, it decreases in value and eventually becomes worthless. Thus, new currency must be fed into the system to replace that which is worn out and discarded. Feather currency is of absolutely no other use than as a medium of exchange, a standard of value, and as a means of storing wealth. It cannot be worn, it is not displayed, and it cannot be converted into any other usable form. From this it can be seen that it has all the properties of true money, yet it circulates as a commodity in a free market without regulation except for those forces created by supply and demand. Unlike our money, which we distinguish from commodities, feather currency has some of the properties of durable goods whose value depreciates over time. The original value of a piece of currency is determined by its size and the richness of its color when new. These criteria are reducible to the number of birds used and the amount of labor required for its construction. For an average piece today,

[287] about three hundred birds are necessary. The total labor required by all three specialties is roughly ten to eleven work weeks or about five hundred to six hundred and fifty man-hours. Depreciation of the currency is measured also by two criteria: the amount of red down worn off through handling and defects caused by insects and tropical growths. When the last bit of red disappears from the top surface, the currency becomes valueless and is thrown away.

In addition to the value as determined by the four criteria just mentioned, every piece of currency has its rarity value. This rarity value is always negotiated separately when currencies are exchanged, that is, when one piece is changed for two or more of lower value. The rarity value is an expression of how badly the purchaser of a highly valued piece wants it, and this, of course, is determined by its scarcity. It is a fact that the

higher the value of a piece of currency, the fewer there are; thus the rarity value increases with the value as determined by its condition. Translated in terms of our own money, it would be as if a ten-dollar bill was worth more than ten one-dollar bills because there are fewer of them in circulation. Unlike our money again, feather currency has no numerical units of value which permit easy and exact equivalencies to be made. Rather, the value of this exotic currency is not unlike that of precious gems, were they to be used as a medium of exchange. Each stone would be unique as to quality and size, and value could only be determined by recognized criteria of excellence plus the condition of the market. 435 436

Currency flows outward from its source throughout Santa Cruz Island and on to the Reef and Duff Islands in the north. These latter islands constitute areas of perennial shortage. Balancing this one-way flow of currency is a reverse movement of the most valuable commodity of all--women. The Reef Islands send out some of their women in exchange for bride prices paid in feather currency. Santa Cruz Island never sends its women abroad under any circumstances. Formerly, these women came to Santa Cruz both as wives and as concubines. The concubines were clearly distinguished from wives by the fact that they were shared by a group of men in a form of polyandry; they did no gardening or other domestic tasks normally assigned to women; and while they enjoyed a specially favored social position, they could be purveyed as prostitutes, sold outright, or even killed by the will of their owners alone. Bride prices for concubines were much higher than for ordinary wives--ten times higher to be exact. Due to government regulations, wives only are brought to Santa Cruz Island nowadays, but these are the prestigeful marriages, and their bride prices are larger than those of domestic unions. 438 [595] [548] [583] [554]

This one-way movement of women is correlated with an interesting population phenomenon. Santa Cruz Island population statistics reveal an abundance of males as compared with females of marriageable age, while in the Reef Islands the ratio is nearly even. This abundance of men is a phenomenon which has been noted in other Melanesian and New Guinea populations, but it has neither been investigated nor explained. [162]

The Duff Islands in the extreme northeast corner of the group come into the economic picture, not by sending out women, but by being specialists in making large sailing canoes in which cargos and passengers are transported interisland. These canoes are mainly sold to the Polynesian-speaking people of the small atolls of the Western Reef Islands who make their money by voyaging and trading throughout the group. Formerly, they sailed as far as the southern islands of Vanikoro and Utupua, ninety miles south of Santa Cruz Island. These islands depended upon receiving ground shell discs and special lengths of loom-woven fabric of banana fiber, specialties of certain districts of the Reef and Santa Cruz Islands, which were used as currency there. For these they traded feathers used on Santa Cruz Island for the making of feather currency. These shell and fabric currencies of Vanikoro and Utupua have no currency value in the island where they were made, and feather currency has no value in the former islands. [396] [505] [436] [184]

The Santa Cruz Group has a long history of contact with European civilization, beginning with Mendaña's second voyage in 1595. For the most part, however, the early contacts had little effect on the islanders, but were disastrous for the Europeans. Mendaña himself and many of his company died on Santa Cruz Island, Carteret lost some of his men there also when he attempted to land, La Perouse and his entire expedition perished on Vanikoro, and late in the nineteenth century Commodore Goodenough and a dozen Anglican missionaries, including one bishop, met death in several attempts to bring this island group within the confines of the British Empire and Christendom. 177

From 1900 onward the situation began to change. The few recruits who had gone away to work on plantations, and schoolboys who had gone away to mission schools returned [464]

with diseases. After several great epidemics, the population set into a decline which has only now been arrested. The British Solomon Island Protectorate brought them under direct governmental control in the mid-1920's, and more and more men began going out to work under regulated recruiting conditions. These recruits, of course, returned with trade goods. All of these factors influenced the economic system greatly, but trading and the use of feather currency went on as before. There is certain evidence that the cessation of feuding and the importation of steel tools and other articles of civilized manufacture actually stimulated the internal economy rather than depressed it. Small amounts of Australian currency did get into circulation as early as 1930, but not in sufficient quantity to alter the internal monetary system. By the end of the Pacific War, however, the situation had dramatically changed. Recruiting shot up, laborer's wages increased greatly, imported trade goods, though never really plentiful—not even today—became well distributed, and appreciable amounts of Australian money came to be used alongside of and interchangeably with feather currency. As regards currency, the acculturation dilemma had started. The two currencies were in circulation side by side, and it seems as if it would be a matter of simple choice of one over the other. Now let us look at the results of this choice situation after more than a decade of real competition between the two currencies.

The production of feather currency has dropped far below what it normally would be, but the demand for it has remained constant. As a consequence, the value has risen sharply and continues to rise. By comparisons of its purchasing power in pigs and in bride prices, the value has risen 200 to 300 per cent in the past fifteen years. This deflation applies equally to Santa Cruz Island where it is made and to the outer islands toward which it flows and where it has always been scarcer. Conversely, Australian money has increased as more and more men have gone out to work and brought back some of their net incomes in cash. From comparisons of savings of wealthy men, it is estimated that the amount of Australian currency in circulation has risen at least 400 per cent in the past fifteen years. Its buying power with respect to imported trade goods has remained roughly the same, for these prices have risen along with wages. The demand for Australian money has certainly increased as people have come to depend more and more upon imported goods which can only be purchased with it, but its buying power with respect to local products—pigs, for instance—has greatly diminished as it has become more plentiful.

As always, these two currencies are, in theory and in fact, perfectly convertible, even though there are some difficulties in fixing values due to the nonquantified means of valuation in feather currency. But with feather currency becoming scarcer and Australian money becoming more plentiful, the exchange rates have been altering drastically. As an illustration, a piece of feather currency which could have been purchased easily for one pound in 1945 might now command as much as twenty. Even at this price, an owner might be reluctant to part with his feather currency, for he may not wish to convert from a currency which is increasing in value to one which in terms of the internal economy is doing the opposite. Because of this unwillingness, it has become harder to fix a value in Australian money for feather currencies of very high value (i.e., those that are very scarce), while those pieces of very low value are easily converted or exchanged.

The slowdown in the production of feather currency is traceable directly to the actions of one of the three specialists, the binders. There are but five of these men currently working on Santa Cruz Island. Since their own needs for feather currency can be easily satisfied by their own work, they wish to ply their trades principally for Australian money. Like skilled workers anywhere, they prefer to work less for large margins of profit than more for small margins. There are young men in the line of inheritance, but

they, for the time being at least, prefer to go out to work for wages rather than to stay home as the older men do. As a result of this, it takes nearly forty pounds to pay for all the materials and services required for a single piece of new feather currency. This is roughly equivalent to over one year's net earnings in the labor lines of a plantation. In effect, feather currency is being priced off the currency market. In contrast to the binders, the bird catchers are eager to work for old rates, for the lack of production of currency has seen a marked rise in the bird population. Birds are abundant in areas close at hand, and they are easy to catch. To the catchers, this means they do not have to work as hard or long to snare the required number for an order as they formerly did.

Despite this financial crisis, feather currency continues to be an absolute necessity in normal social relations. Most men are unwilling to marry off their daughters without receiving bride prices paid in the conventional manner. Pig breeders, too, demand payment in feather currency for fine animals that are to be used in maturation ceremonies, and the same feelings are held by the many turtle fishermen and the shark fishermen who furnish the special meat for ceremonial occasions. Nowhere has the confidence in feather currency been undermined. In fact, just the opposite realization—that it is becoming increasingly valuable—is what is at the bottom of the shortage. Since the currency is perishable, it cannot be hoarded indefinitely and retained as a kind of special purpose heirloom, to be exchanged only on ceremonial occasions. If present trends continue, then it must eventually disappear, and its functions will be assumed by the use of Australian money.

If one were to look casually at this situation, without knowledge of the internal dynamics, this would appear to be a simple instance of diffusion. A case in which a new element—Australian money—is replacing an old element on a one-for-one basis. It might seem like a simple choice situation, exactly like many others created by acculturation—a case where the native is choosing one object in preference for another according to some utilitarian scheme of values. One could even argue that the replacement is a rational economic choice based on the knowledge that one is convertible to the other, and one has the more general usage; therefore the more general one will be chosen. The apparent choice makes economic sense, too, for Australian money is not perishable, it cannot depreciate with age, and it is easier to carry, to use, and to exchange. All of these utilities are indeed recognized, but they have not shaken the traditional confidence in the indigenous currency.

This apparently simple case of change is analagous to kinds of monetary crises our own society has experienced when, during the bimetallic era, the relative values of gold and silver got out of hand; when various paper moneys were issued on hard currencies; and when international exchange rates between currencies fluctuated. In these situations, people always hang on to the more valuable currency, creating a scarcity, and taking it off the market. It seems, then, that Gresham's Law and the Doctrine of Bimetallic Flows are as applicable to this primitive monetary system as they are to civilized systems.

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NOTES

1. Bohannon, Paul, "The Impact of Money on an African Subsistence Economy," Journal of Economic History, XIX, 491-503. 1959.

2. Field work in the Santa Cruz Group was carried out during 1958-60 as part of the Tri-Institutional Pacific Program (Bishop Museum, University of Hawaii, Yale University), supported by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.